

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



William Appleton Potter
1842-1909

Although based in New York throughout most of his career, William Appleton Potter designed buildings for seventeen states of the union, including Maine, and also for Washington, D.C. So far as is known, he is responsible for two Maine houses, both summer cottages built in Bar Harbor in 1887.

Noted primarily for his college, church, and government buildings in the High Victorian Gothic style, Potter was also responsible for several very interestingly designed houses. While he was in partnership with Robert Henderson Robertson (1849-1919) from 1875 through 1880, his firm's houses contributed greatly to the transformation of the English-imported "Queen Anne" mode into the rambling and quintessentially American shingled house—the type known as "Shingle Style." The first of these was the Bryce Gray summer house (c.1877) in Long Branch, New Jersey, outstanding for its

multi-gabled roof, extensive veranda, and combination of applied half-timbering, clapboards, and shingles. Long gone, the Gray House, and the two Potter & Robertson cottages that followed it, the Commodore C. H. Baldwin House (1877-78) in Newport and the Adam-Derby House (1878) in Oyster Bay, Long Island, were published in the *American Architect* where other architects and builders could see and thus imitate them. The Adam-Derby House stands out as being almost as advanced an example of the early Shingle Style as William Ralph Emerson's C.J. Morrill House (1879) in Bar Harbor, and its combination of clapboards and shingles is actually more typical than is the entirely shingle-covered Morrill House.¹ Although designed and built nearly a decade later, the two Bar Harbor houses, especially Mrs. Robert B. Potter's cottage, repeat and expand many features of this group.

Born in Schenectady, New York, Potter grew up in Philadelphia where his father, the Rev. Alonzo Potter, presided as Episcopal Bishop of Pennsylvania. He attended Union College in Schenectady, graduating in 1864 with a degree in chemistry. During the following year he worked as a laboratory instructor in analytical chemistry at Columbia University's School of Mines. Apparently he was not satisfied with that career, for he spent the next two years traveling in Europe. In 1867 he entered the architectural office of his half-brother Edward Tuckerman Potter (1831-1904), where he served as an apprentice until 1869.²

The enviable commission for the Chancellor Green Library (1871-73) at Princeton University launched Potter's career. That distinctive octagonal building as well as the architect's impressively towered South Congregational Church (1872-73) in Springfield, Massachusetts, and the several monumental courthouse and post office buildings designed during his tenure as Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury (1875-76) represent the climax of the American High Victorian Gothic movement. In order to maintain his practice while he was serving as Supervising Architect—chiefly his ongoing work in Princeton—Potter entered into partnership with Robertson.



Figure 1. Miss Julia Stevens Cottage, Bar Harbor, c. 1912 view (Courtesy Bar Harbor Historical Society).

After the partnership was dissolved, Potter continued to design houses as well as other buildings. However, because his papers sank with a ship taking all his belongings to Rome at the time of his retirement in 1902, it is not possible to document the houses with much accuracy. He probably designed many more than are known. Bar Harbor's West Street was only laid out in 1886, and Potter's houses were among the earliest built there.³ The smaller of the two, on a narrow lot on the south side of West Street east of Bridge Street, was built for Julia Stevens of New York and is called "Chantier" (Figure 1). Miss Stevens was the sister of Mrs. Robert B. Potter, whose Potter-designed house known as "Westbridge" stands north of West Street overlooking Frenchman's Bay (Figure 2). Also a New Yorker, Mrs. Potter was the widow of General Robert Brown Potter, a Civil War hero and another half-brother of the architect. A third Stevens sister, Mrs. W. B. Rice, also had a house on West Street, built about the same time adjacent to Mrs. Potter's house.⁴

Today re-sided and much altered, Miss Stevens' cottage featured a multi-gabled roof, a veranda on one side, several bay windows, and a corner porch shielding the main entrance. Both it and Westbridge were at least partly sided with shingles, but old photographs show mainly clapboards—and only clapboards on the Stevens house. Inside, Chantier had the usual reception rooms on the first floor, bedrooms on the second, and servants' quarters in the top story. The kitchen and pantry were at the rear of the first-floor hall.

Westbridge is a larger and more picturesquely designed house set on a spacious lawn sloping down to the bay. Now stuccoed, but otherwise looking very much as it did in 1887, the house has a two-story corner loggia and a wide veranda wrapping around three sides—to accommodate the ocean breezes and the splendid view of water and mountains—as well as a service ell in the rear (Figure 3). On the first floor, a twenty-foot-square hall extends nearly the length of the house. This hall, actually a living hall with its own fireplace, opens through a portiere to the parlor on the right and adjoins a wide staircase lighted by a group of narrow windows on the left.⁵ In respect to its plan and openness, Westbridge recalls Potter & Robertson's Jacob S. Carpenter House (1879), now part of Douglas College in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Thus the firm's legacy of the late 1870s is preserved in these two historic Bar Harbor houses, rare survivors of the terrible fire that in 1947 destroyed so much of this beautiful resort.⁶

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September, 1985

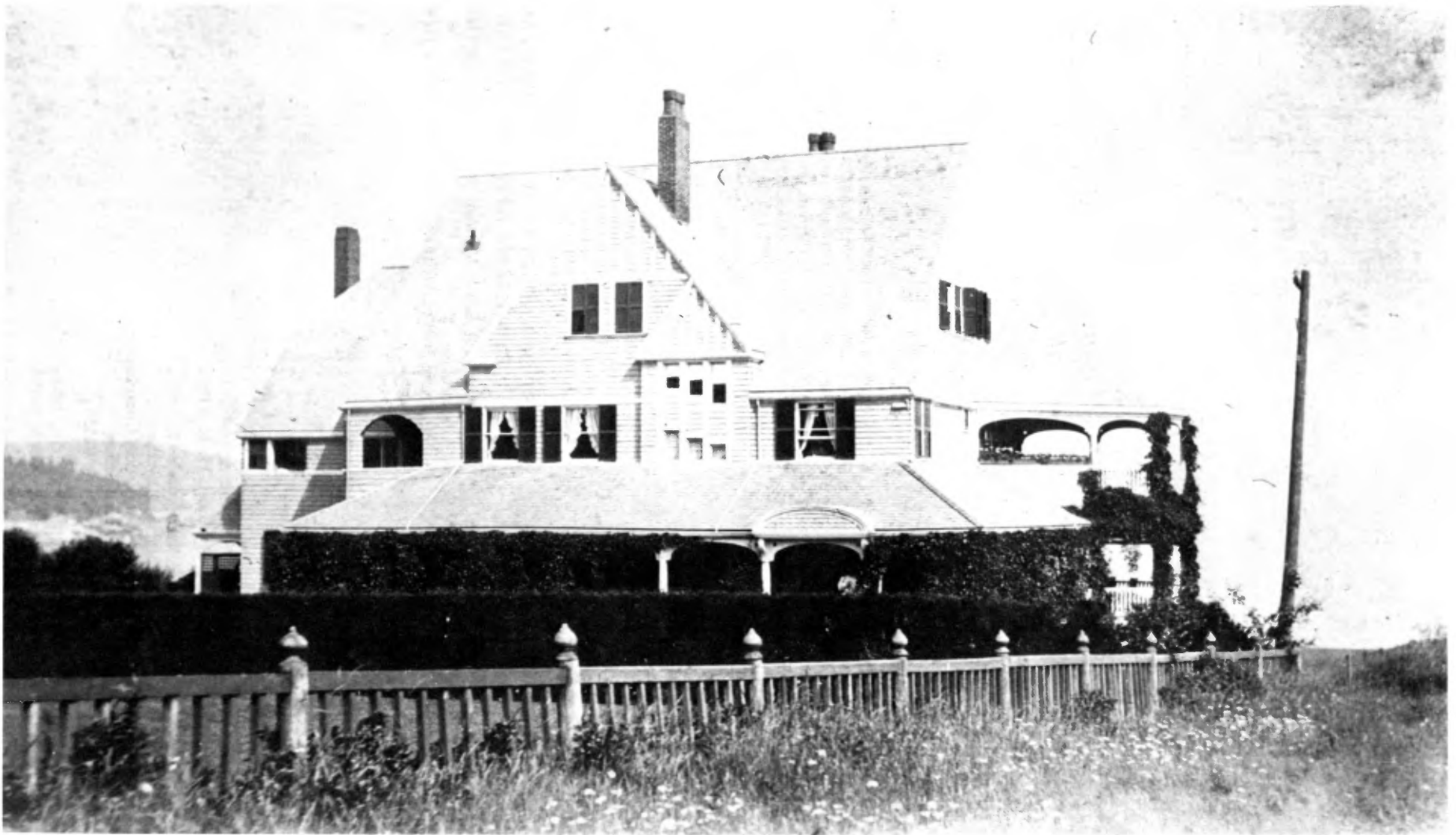


Figure 2. Mrs. Robert B. Potter Cottage , Bar Harbor, c. 1900 view (Courtesy Bar Harbor Historical Society).



Figure 3. Mrs. Robert B. Potter Cottage (right), Bar Harbor, c. 1910 view (MHPC).

NOTES

- ¹ The Adam-Derby House is illustrated and discussed in some detail in "The Summer Cottages of Potter & Robertson, R. H. Robertson, and Robertson & Potter," written by the author and soon to be published by the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities as a chapter of a book on Long Island mansions.
- ² William and Edward Potter's grandfather, Eliphalet Nott, served as president of Union College from 1804-66. So far as is known, Edward Potter's only Maine commissions are the grave monument and commemorative tablet to Bishop George Burgess (both c. 1866-67) in the cemetery and interior of Christ Church in Gardiner. The impressive marble monument is a cross rising from a tall base on which is carved the emblematic mitre and crozier as well as the Bishop's birth and death dates (1809-66) and the date of his consecration as first Episcopal bishop of Maine (1847). The names of the architect and the sculptor, James M. Moffitt of New York, also appear on the base.
- ³ I am grateful to Elizabeth L. Burns for informing me of the existence of these houses and to Roger G. Reed for his help in researching them.
- ⁴ Known as "Casa far Niente" and not extant. The architect was Bruce Price, and the house can be seen behind and to the left of the Potter Cottage in Figure 3. For the family relationship of the three sisters, see Robert B. Potter's obituary in the *New York Times* for Feb. 20, 1887.
- ⁵ The contractor for both Bar Harbor houses was D. A. Bunker, who was also master workman on Mrs. Potter's house. Norris Brothers did the mason work and Leighton & Davenport the plumbing for both. Victor LaCount was the master workman for the Stevens house, and George Austin did the painting: *Mt. Desert Herald*, April 1 & 29, 1887. For these houses see also *Bar Harbor Times*, June 12, 1980. The West Street Historic District, which includes the two Potter-designed houses, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.
- ⁶ Later, in partnership with Robert Burnside Potter (1869-1934), who was Mrs. Robert Brown Potter's son and William Potter's nephew, Robert H. Robertson designed a Colonial Revival house in Bar Harbor for John W. Auchincloss. This house, called "Miramichi" (1906), burned in the 1947 fire: *Bar Harbor Record*, Mar. 15, 1905.

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY WILLIAM APPLETON POTTER

Mrs. Robert B. Potter Cottage, West Street, Bar Harbor, 1887,
Extant.
Miss Julia Stevens Cottage, West Street, Bar Harbor, 1887,
Altered.

Photograph of William Appleton Potter
Courtesy of Mrs. J. H. N. Potter

Volume II, Number 11, 1985
Published by the
Maine Historic Preservation Commission
55 Capitol Street
Augusta, Maine 04333

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*This publication has been financed in part with federal funds from
the National Park Service, Department of the Interior.*